

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 1125

By Lynn

A RESOLUTION to recognize the members and ministers of the Williamson Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church upon the occasion of their 158th anniversary.

WHEREAS, it is appropriate that the members of this legislative body should recognize those venerable religious institutions and their congregations who, through their unflagging capacity for love, dedication of spirit, and faith in God, strive to enrich the lives of people in their communities; and

WHEREAS, the good people of Williamson Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church comprise one such estimable congregation; they are celebrating the church's 158th Anniversary with a weeklong Spring Revival celebration leading up to a special anniversary service on April 20, 2008; and

WHEREAS, with a theme of "Building on the Lord's Promises for a Strong Tomorrow," Romans 8:28, the celebrations will be a time of reflecting on the past, giving thanks for the present, and joyfully looking forward to a future filled with spiritual enrichment; and

WHEREAS, the oldest African-American church in West Wilson County, the congregation was organized some time between 1840 and 1850; the exact year is not clearly known due to the church's records of that time having been destroyed by fire; and

WHEREAS, the Mastman family, owners of a plantation on which the church later would stand, gave an acre of the land to a group of slaves for the purpose of establishing a church; an African-American preacher named Richard Williamson assumed the responsibility for forming the church; and

WHEREAS, a log church building was built on the site, and a slave congregation worshipped there on Sundays, with the children of the congregation meeting at the building

during the week to pursue their education; the church was named Williamson Chapel in honor of its founder; and

WHEREAS, the church continued to meet and thrive as a free church after the Civil War; a community formed around the church and also became known as Williamson Chapel because its social and spiritual center was the church; and

WHEREAS, in 1876, Richard and Chaney Williamson transferred the property in the name of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church; most early church records have been destroyed by fire, but the 1876 deed records the congregation's trustees as Cal Gordon (husband of Lizzie Williamson, the daughter of Richard and Chaney Williamson), Joe Johnson, Hiram Williamson (brother of Richard Williamson), Jessie Parker, and John Horton; and

WHEREAS, since the time of its organization, Williamson Chapel C.M.E. Church has experienced numerous changes, not only in the lives and hearts of the lay people and the pastorate, but also in the church's structure itself; and

WHEREAS, the original log church was torn down in approximately 1896, and a frame building was built a few feet from the original building; the building stood on stilts and had no electricity, so kerosene lamps were used for light and two potbelly stoves were used for heat; some time in the late 1920s or early 1930s, a church bell was added to the tower, and it is still rung occasionally by the pastor today; and

WHEREAS, under the astute leadership of the Reverend John H. Britton, the church organized the Pastor's Aide Board, new choir robes were bought for the newly organized choir, the church's exterior was renovated with a rock veneer, a choir room and a pastor's study were added, and electricity and a furnace were both installed; later on, electric heat would warm the little church, even as the Gospel being preached within those walls was warming hearts, and souls were being won for Christ; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Britton built upon the legacy of Richard Williamson and other previous pastors; not much is known of these men who served their Lord so ably, but some of them were the Reverends A.J. Parker, A.H. Jenkins, D.R. Wiles, W.R. Potter, E. Wiley, and D.L. Wein; and

WHEREAS, Rev. John H. Britton, Sr. educated himself after dropping out of school and later enrolled at Fisk University and mastered the Bible curriculum there; Rev. Britton served the congregation from 1936 until 1962, and his belief in the importance of education inspired a legacy of educational achievement that still impacts Williamson Chapel today; and

WHEREAS, those pastors who served following Reverend Britton's tenure at Williamson Chapel were the Reverends Clarence Bagwell, Frank Hudson, Wiley Hatchett, and Dr. Solomon N. Shannon; and

WHEREAS, August of 1984 saw the Reverend George W. Coleman, a brilliant theologian, arrive at Williamson Chapel C.M.E. Church; under his leadership, Williamson Chapel experienced great spiritual and physical growth, as new members were added to the roster, and new literary texts and other resource materials for the church library were purchased, as was a new parsonage for the current and future pastors and their families; and

WHEREAS, following Pastor Coleman at Williamson Chapel were the Reverends T.R. Crosslin and Raymond Sommerville; the Reverend Frederick L. Braddock, Sr., served as the church's pastor from 1989-98, and under his inspired leadership, the church experienced more growth with a significant membership increase and new ministries being organized, including the male chorus, missionary choir, and men's fellowship, along with a strong emphasis being placed on children and youth ministry; and

WHEREAS, more physical improvements were made during Reverend Braddock's ministry at Williamson Chapel: the pews were padded, new windows were installed, new doors were added to the front of the church and to Hatchett Hall, a new piano and drum set were purchased for use during worship, carpet was installed, restrooms were refurbished, and the pastor's study was renovated; and

WHEREAS, the congregation has since seen the mortgage paid in full on the parsonage, and the former elementary school and the land upon which it is located has been deeded to the church's trustees to be used by the church and community; and

WHEREAS, in July of 1998, the Reverend Woodrow W. Harris, Jr., became the church's pastor; he, along with his family, have excelled as the first family of the church, leading by

example and fostering growth and hope for the congregation's future, thus revitalizing its membership; and

WHEREAS, as the church has entered a new century, it has followed a vision for further growth in membership and an enlarged sanctuary; the strength of the church's original congregants remains and fuels the current members, some of whom are direct descendants of members of the early slave church; and

WHEREAS, for over a century and a half, the congregation of Williamson Chapel have made prominent contributions to the civic, educational, and social fabric of Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, following Jesus's command to "Go ye forth and preach," they are devoted to sharing the joy and peace that can only be found within Jesus Christ; and

WHEREAS, they have a long-established legacy of committed service to their community, and they have taken to heart the words of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words"; and

WHEREAS, these fine Christians personify Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord"; and

WHEREAS, Williamson Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is among those institutions upon which a just and orderly society is based; it is a focal point for our citizens to worship their Creator as a community of faith and from which they reach out to the secular community as a response to God's saving grace; and

WHEREAS, Williamson Chapel is truly one of the great religious institutions and catalysts for positive spiritual change in our State and Nation, and the members of this exceptional congregation should be appropriately honored for their exemplary service to their fellow Christians and to the good people of Tennessee; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED FIFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we join in celebrating the 158th Anniversary of Williamson Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, thank the good people of this historic congregation for their

notable service to their Lord and the State of Tennessee, and wish them much continued success and happiness.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.